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ABSTRACT

The electronic classroom proved particularly effective in dealing with racism, sexism, and homophobia in an honors English class, in part because it facilitates teaching by modeling rather than by dominating. Synchronous software facilitates diversity better than the usual collaborative learning group whose goal of tailoring discussions to reach a consensus has been criticized as suppressing difference and enforcing conformity. Locating authority in individual readers enables self-disclosure that emphasizes differences. Focusing on emotional literacy, especially anger, reveals conflicts rather than agreement. As individuals generate their dissensus and focus on their emotions, they discover powerful emotional bonds which emphasize both their differences and their similarity. (Sample questions from and responses to an electronically administered course evaluation are included.) (SAM)

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SEXUAL DIFFERENCE AND PARTICIPATORY PEDAGOGY

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I have used the electronic classroom for five years or so. I use both synchronous and asynchronous networking, that is, both the real time program INTERCHANGE to allow all students and engage in the class discussion at once and the electronic mail program CONTACT to facilitate peer critiquing of student essays. However, I use the networked computers no more than one class meeting out of three. At times one of the class meetings is devoted to small face to face groups.

I teach a course that is quite different from those taught by my colleagues represented on this panel. I have been teaching a two-semester honors freshman English class called "World Literature and Composition." It is a course offered by Plan II, a program limited to the top 500 or so of the 35,000 or so undergraduates at our institution.

It has been my experience, and that of Lester Faigley among others in my department, that the electronic classroom is particularly effective in dealing with racism, sexism, and other prejudices based on judging by appearance. However, last year I had a self-identified gay student in the course whose father is an English professor and a friend of mine. His son apparently wants to go on to become a professor of Russian. Hence I became more conscious of the possible use of the electronic classroom to deal with homophobia.

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At the end of the 91-92 school year a questionnaire was administered to the 20 students in that course. Near the end of the questionnaire the following item appeared: "146. Of the following possible changes to be made in this course the one that would have made the most improvement in the course for you was.' 5 students chose to complete the sentence with "<A>Have more discussion of and literature about gender and sexism." 4 chose "<B>Have more discussion of and literature about gender and sexism, including homosexuality and homophobia." One chose "<C>Have more discussion of literature about racism." 3 chose "<D>Have more discussion of literature about classism (discrimination based on economic class]." 6 chose "<E>None of the above." One used "^<F>Other suggestions" to talk about a different question altogether. Thus about half the class wanted more discussion of and literature about gender and sexism with about half of those wanting to include homosexuality and homophobia. The next item was "147. Of the following possible changes to be made in this course the one that would have made the SECOND most improvement in the course for you was" and now 1 chose A, 6 chose B, 5 chose C, 3 chose D, and 1 chose F. [but I have no record of what that suggestion was]. The answer that drew the greatest number of responses this time was the homophobia discussion option.

One item in the middle of the questionnaire began "[69.] The best way of conveying information about sexism, racism, homophobia and related issues for me was" and 7 students completed the sentence by choosing "A> Discussing the relevance of these issues to literary works with others in my face to face group." 4 chose "<B> Discussing these issues in my essays and/or CONTACT comments." 8 chose <C>

"Discussing these issues in INTERCHANGE." Not one student chose "<D>Discussing the relevance of these issues to literary works with the teacher." In other words, none of the students wanted to deal with these issues in the usual teacher-dominated classroom situation, and they preferred the electronic classroom over face to face groups in a ratio of 12 to 7. However, two students chose to design their own answers. The self identified gay male chose not the electronic classroom but "discussing the relevance of these issues to literary works with others in my face to face group" and added "but not all the issues came up and those that did not often." A female friend of this young man wrote "I don't really think we delved into these areas as much as we could/should have. We talked about racism which was cool, and I guess sexism to a small extent. We didn't even begin to discuss homophobia. I don't really know what the attitudes of much of our class are, but it just seemed that no one really wanted to discuss this topic. It's a shame really; I think we should have talked about our attitudes. I'd like to know what people think since this IS an important concept in my life."

The next question began "70. The SECOND best way of conveying information about these issues for me was" and now 2 chose A, 7 chose B, 8 chose C, 2 chose D. In other words, now the ratio was 15 to 4 in favor of the electronic classroom, with the remaining 4 who voted even split between face to face peer groups and the usual teacher dominated classroom. One young woman commented : "Interchange is by far the best because to talk about touchy issues we think them out before we speak but we still get reactions from others"

The last item began "149. The best way to deal with a controversial issue such as homosexuality and homophobia in class is for the teacher" and 1 chose to complete the sentence with "<A>To lecture the class about the best way to deal with these issues and demand that the class follow the rules he or she sets forth. " 6 chose "<B>To intervene whenever any apparent prejudice is discerned and discuss the issue then with the class." 13 chose "<C>To participate in discussions on the subject as an equal, more than as a "teacher," as in an INTERCHANGE discussion." None chose in which the teacher merely passively observed. Again, the majority of the students rejected the teacher-dominated classroom, choosing the kind of egalitarianism available only in the electronic classroom.

My current incarnation of that course includes 17 students and we no longer break down into small groups. At the end of the first semester, that is in December of 1992, the following item was included in the questionnaire: "[110.] The best way of conveying information about sexism, racism, homophobia and related issues for me is" and 2 students chose to complete the sentence with "<A>> Discussing these issues in my essays and/or MAIL comments." 11 chose "<B>Discussing these issues in INTERCHANGE." 4 chose "<C>Discussing the relevance of these issues to literary works with the teacher." No one chose "D" to suggest another option. Again the majority of students chose the electronic classroom, primarily the program INTERCHANGE. The next item was "111. The second best way of conveying information about these issues for me is:" and now 8 chose A, 6 chose B, and 3 chose C. Now the ratio of those who chose the electronic classroom over the old teacher-dominated classroom was 14 to three.

So for me, the optimum solution is to use the electronic classroom periodically -- every third or fourth class meeting -- to remove visual cues that stimulate stereotyping. Such cues are less important, however, in the case of the gay\lesbian student than a participatory teacher response that models the kind of healthy interaction that is sought. Such an approach can be more effective than dominating or even intervening responses by themselves. The electronic classroom also can generate a transcript to be examined by all participants for evidence of prejudice.

Family psychologists have demonstrated the significance of "experiential learning": children following the example rather than the advice of their parents. Similarly, students tune in to how we teach as much as to what we teach. A professor lecturing to a class about respecting difference, who does not allow genuine disagreement with him or her in the classroom, is communicating lack of respect for difference no matter what the professor may ostensibly be saying. Indeed, dominating or intervening without modelling can be counterproductive, just as parents telling children to do one thing while they do the opposite does more harm than good.

The electronic classroom facilitates teaching by modelling rather than by dominating. With all the computers linked by synchronous networking software such as INTERCHANGE the controlling instructor becomes obsolete. In this program, the students become truly empowered in the actual discussion because they soon discover that the teacher has no more technical power than they do. Such software has proved more popular than both small face-to-face and whole class discussions combined (Bump "Radical Changes in Class Discussion Using Networked

Computers" Computers and the Humanities 24.1: (1990) 49-65, p. 54). In such discussion "the teacher is not the one with the answers, but the one setting up learning situations .... merely one line among many on the screen, ... less [an] unerring authority and more of a collaborator" (Batson "Computer" 14-15). Such a classroom can serve as a model for more radical changes in education called for by Friere and Selfe. It enables the "heterogeneous conversation," the "mosaic of vernaculars, the multi-accented idiomatic expression of race, class, and gender differences," which is the ideal of collaborative learning (Trimbur 609).

Of course, as long as the teacher must evaluate the students there will never be complete equality, and even in the electronic classroom teachers may still "unknowingly ... assume positions of power that contradict our notions of good teaching" (Hawisher and Selfe 64), but the transcripts of the sessions produced by the software enable both teacher and students to check closely all interactions for bias, favoritism, and the influence of specific prejudices about sexual orientation, race, class, and gender. Class sessions can then be devoted to sharing the various discoveries made by the students.

Because there is no requirement to go on to achieve consensus, synchronous software can facilitate diversity better than the usual collaborative learning group whose goal of consensus has been criticized because it "suppresses difference, and enforces conformity" (Trimbur 602) .Locating authority in the individual readers, their self-disclosure emphasizes their differences, their dissensus rather than their consensus. Focusing on emotional literacy, especially

anger, often reveals conflicts rather than agreements (Bump "Radical" 57-8), a goal of left-wing critics such as Greg Myers. However, as the individuals generate their dissensus and focus on their emotions they discover powerful bonds emotional between them, the paradox of simultaneous difference and similarity, discovering a common humanity -- membership in the largest community of all.